The Carmarthen Sorting Tender and Carriage

By Keith Morris

In Victorian times, railway routes were being laid all around the country, many even in the smallest of places. Keith Morris discusses one line which, despite being to one of the smallest locations in the UK, managed to be serviced by a sorting tender and a Travelling Post Office. The sorting service for the line lasted for only 29 years, making any TPO items from it extremely rare.

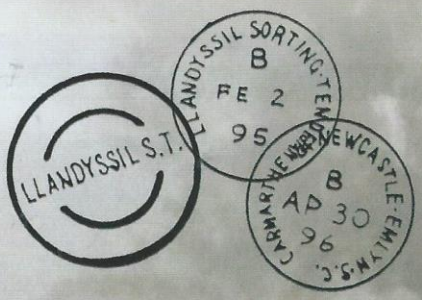

Fig 1 The W402 Llandyssil Sorting Tender postmark. Less than ten covers are known with it

Fig 2 Registered 2d. blue postal stationery cover to Canada featuring a W402 postmark dated 7 June 1880 (Reduced)

Fig 3 The W403 postmark of the Llandyssil Sorting Tender which has been recorded used both as a canceller and a backstamp

For the sake of the magazine and its contents page, the title of this article has been abbreviated to the above, but in real life the title should read as, 'The Carmarthen and Llandyssil Sorting Tender and Carmarthen and Newcastle Emlyn Sorting Carriage.' While this actual title sounds a touch longwinded, it is the story in two parts and fully relates to those heady days in Victorian times when *all* routes to anywhere were possible and railways were being laid in all directions to all places in the country.

Unlike these modern times, when it takes upwards of ten years to build less than a mile of track (Birmingham City Centre), in the 1830s, and for some 30 years afterwards, thousands of miles of track was laid all over the country. Many of these lines were to the smallest of places. The line discussed here not only fits the bill as one of the smallest, but it also managed to have what only the main lines were being given – a sorting tender and a TPO (Travelling Post Office). It is not known what the usage of the sorting tender and the later sorting carriage was, but cancellations known to be have been produced for the this route are, in the main, very rare and even non-existent.

All of the railways of the time were built by private owners and in most cases by public share subscription. This resulted in much duplication of routes, as can be seen in this case where the original line, planned from Carmarthen to Cardigan, was halted at Newcastle Emlyn and never completed due to the rival railway line built to the west.

The construction of a broad-gauge railway from Carmarthen to Cardigan via Newcastle Emlyn was authorised by Parliament in 1854 and building commenced some time afterwards. Originally named the Teifi Valley Railway it was first conceived as a 7ft ¼in (2140 mm) broad-gauge line between Carmarthen and Cardigan. In fact, it was unable to raise the necessary capital and was loss-making from the time of opening and was in receivership for much of its life. The line was opened temporarily in 1860, under the South Wales Railway and was fully opened the following year. It was operated by the Carmarthen and Cardigan Railway (C&CR) between Carmarthen and Cynwyl Elfed. By 1864 the line was extended to Pencader and Llandyssil but never extended further during its independent existence.

It was converted to standard gauge (4ft 8½in (1435 mm)) and this was completed on 1 June 1872, at which time broad gauge operation elsewhere in Wales had already ceased: and so, the C&CR ran the very last broad-gauge trains in Wales. However, the company was bankrupt. The line was purchased by the Great Western Railway and extended to the terminus at Newcastle Emlyn in 1895. The GWR did not build the line on to Cardigan and Newcastle Emlyn remained the terminus.

The Llandyssil sorting tender service

A sorting carriage was established on 14 December 1875, working between Carmarthen and Llandyssil as part of a passenger train, usually at the rear. A handstamp was first issued over a year later on 6 January 1877 by the Post Office.

There was a Night Mail service in each direction and a Day Mail service to Llandyssil. The timings, as recorded in the Postmaster General's minute book in 1893, are shown in *Table 1*. For the Day Mail the carriage was returned empty from Llandyssil sometime after its arrival at 6.50a.m. in the morning.

Table 1: Carmarthen and Llandyssil schedules

	Depart	Arrive
Night Mail		
Carmarthen	5.30a.m.	
Llandyssi		6.50a.m.
Day Mail		
Carmarthen	3.04p.m.	
Llandyssil		4.05p.m.

Fig 4 Entire from Liverpool to New Quay, Cardiganshire with W403 index B postmark dated 19 September 1879

Fig 5 The W404 postmark

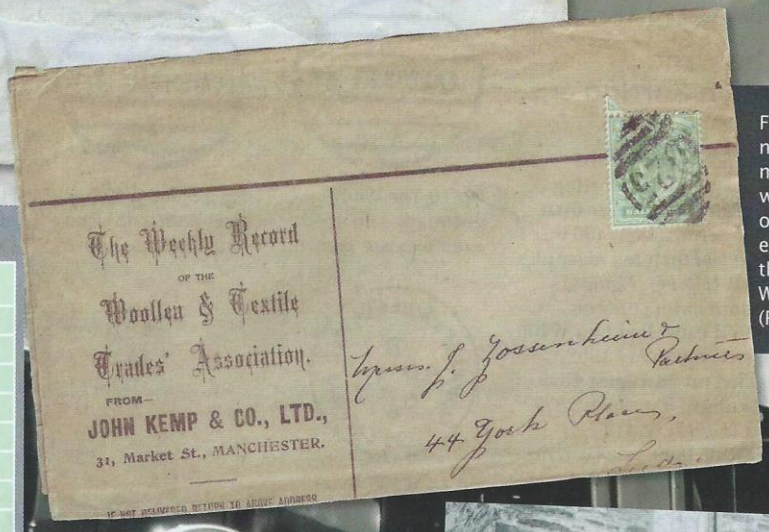

Fig 6 This printed newspaper magazine wrapper is the only known example of the use of the W404 postmark (Reduced)

Table 2: Carmarthen and Newcastle Emlyn schedules

	Depart	Arrive
Night Mail		
Carmarthen	5.50 am	
Newcastle Emlyn		7.05 am
Newcastle Emlyn	4.50 pm	
Carmarthen		7.05 pm
Day Mail		
Carmarthen	1.30 pm	
Newcastle Emlyn		2.50 pm

The Carmarthen and Newcastle Emlyn service

From its beginning, the the service was known as the Carmarthen and Llandyssil Sorting Tender; however, on 27 August 1895 the duty was extended to Newcastle Emlyn and the service was renamed the Carmarthen and Newcastle Emlyn Sorting Carriage; this is, therefore, the second part of the service. The timings for the revised service are shown in *Table 2*.

It was proposed in November 1903, and in a *Post Office Circular* of 26 April 1904 it was announced that, 'On and from the 1st May the Carmarthen & Newcastle Emlyn Sorting Carriage will be abolished.' The savings to the Post Office would be £108 per year.

The sorting service for the Llandyssil Sorting Tender lasted for only 20 years, while the Newcastle Emlyn Sorting Carriage lasted for a mere nine years, making any TPO items for this line very sought after and, in the main, extremely rare.

The Night Mail from Llandyssil to Carmarthen connected with the South Wales TPO (Night Mail) and the Day Mail connected with the South Wales TPO (North Mail). Two new carriages were provided in 1891 and 1892, they were four-wheeled, 28ft-long and oil-lit, and did not have gangways or apparatus for mail exchange. The sorting portion was 15ft 6in long and fitted for both letter and parcel sorting. The remainder of the carriage was a guard's compartment.

Fig 7 The Gomerian Press printing and publishing company in Llandyssil

The postmarks

All of the postmarks for the Carmarthen and Llandyssil Sorting Tender were inscribed 'Llandyssil Sorting Tender'. Handstamps numbered W402–404 (as listed in *The Travelling Post Office Cancellations of Great Britain & Ireland* by Keith Morris and Mike Dovey, regarded as the standard reference work on British TPOs) were issued on 6 January 1877 to Carmarthen. Less than ten covers are known with the W402 postmark (*Fig 1*), the last one being dated 1 November 1883. Most of them are southbound and all have the Index B. *Figure 2* shows a registered 2d. blue postal stationery cover to Canada bearing 1d. and 6d. grey stamps with the W402 postmark dated 7 June 1880. This is one of only two known examples of a registered letter from this sorting tender.

Type W403 (*Fig 3*) has been recorded used both as a canceller and a backstamp. As a canceller, it is recorded with index B, the latest being 26 November 1883. *Figure 4* shows an entire from Liverpool to New Quay, Cardiganshire, with an index B W403 postmark dated 19 September 1879.

Only one example of type W404 (*Fig 5*) is known. It was used on a printed newspaper/magazine wrapper addressed to Leeds with Edward VII ½d. (*Fig 6*). The wrapper and its contents were probably printed and despatched from the Gomerian Press, founded by John David Lewis (1859–1914) as a printing and publishing company based in Llandyssil (*Fig 7*). The company was first established in 1892 and is still owned by the same family to this day.

In 1892, Lewis bought his first press in Brecon and as he had no knowledge of the printing process of the time he advertised for a journeyman printer. The appointment of a 19-year-old who had served his apprenticeship in Anglesey proved to be a solid foundation for the success of his enterprise. W J Jones, who was universally known as Jones Y Printer, was a master craftsman and teacher and served the company faithfully for decades. He remained active and worked as a compositor until just a few months before his death in 1955 aged 82. The name Gomerian Press was almost certainly chosen due to Lewis' high regard for the Reverend Joseph Harris (1773–1825), whose *nom de plume* was Gomer.

Base image credit: Andrew, Steam Train

The earliest known use of postmark W405 is 24 September 1888. Eleven examples are known, all with index B and all used as cancellers (*Fig 8*). *Figure 9* shows a printed stationery card to Llandyssil from Llanarth with a W405 postmark dated 1 February 1892. The W407 postmark (*Fig 10*) was issued in 1886; however, no examples of use are known. Likewise, there are no known examples for W408 issued on 1 October 1888 (*Fig 11*) and W409 issued on 27 September 1889 (*Fig 12*), which indicates just how rare cancellations for this sorting tender are in this first format. *Figure 13* shows the W410 postmark, which was issued on 1 September 1891. Only two examples are known: one on an 1887 Queen Victoria 1s. and another on a 1d. lilac.

Fig 8 Eleven examples of the W405 cancel are known, the earliest being 24 September 1888

Fig 9 W405 postmark, with index B and dated 1 February 1892, on a printed stationery card to Llandyssil from Llanarth (Reduced)

The Carmarthen and Newcastle Emlyn Sorting Carriage

Three postmarks were produced for the Carmarthen and Newcastle Emlyn Sorting Carriage. These cancels are even rarer than the original sorting tender marks. W406 was issued in July 1895 and less than ten examples known, all with index B (*Fig 14*). *Figure 15* shows a plain envelope, with contents, bearing a 1d. Edward VII cancelled by a W406 postmark index B dated 18 January 1902. W411 (*Fig 16*) was issued on 28 August 1895. Only one example is known; it is on an 1877 Jubilee ½d. vermilion (*Fig 17*). W412 (*Fig 18*) was issued on 27 April 1899; however, no examples are known.

Fig 10 The W407 postmark – no used examples are known

Fig 11 The W408 postmark – no used examples are known

Fig 12 The W409 postmark – no used examples are known

Fig 13 The W410 postmark, which was issued on 1 September 1891

Fig 14 W406 issued July 1895. Less than ten examples are known to exist

Fig 15 A cover with an Edward VII 1d. cancelled by a W406 index B postmark dated 18 January 1902 (Reduced)

Why a sorting carriage?

Speculation about why there should be a sorting carriage over such a short and obscure route for a period of nearly 29 years has been going on for even longer than the route was in use. The most popular thought is that there was someone of rank and influence, either postal or railway, who had been in a position to encourage the Post Office to run the three workings back and forth over the route.

It is possible that may have been Frederick A V Campbell, 3rd Earl of Cawdor, formerly, The Viscount Emlyn (*Fig 19*). Born the eldest son of the second Lord Cawdor on 13 February 1847, he was the Member of Parliament (MP) for Carmarthenshire from 1874 to 1885 and was made a Director of the Great Western Board in 1890. Within a year, he was elevated to joint Deputy-Chairman with Alexander Hubbard, and in 1895 he was elected the Chairman of the GWR, becoming the youngest Chairman of a British railway company. He was a most efficient chairman of the Great Western Railway; and was one of the numerous peers who have been directors of public companies.

During his term in office, he bought the lease of the refreshment rooms at Swindon (for many years a thorn in the side for the company) to speed up train services, improved carriages and introduced integration of the bus/rail connections.

On the death of his father, he became Lord Cawdor on 29 March 1898. In March 1905, he resigned his position on the Board when he was offered the distinguished post of First Lord of the Admiralty. He died in 1911.

A contributing justification for the sorting carriage may also be the growing business of the Gomerian Press (described above), which would have been mailing out large quantities of magazines and newspapers on a regular basis to all parts of the country.

It can be seen that building railways in this era was extremely difficult and the desire to make a profit was often defeated by either rival lines or a total lack of revenue. While the line from Carmarthen to Cardigan was nearly completed, it was in fact outdone by a rival who completed the task of linking the two towns, but in a different direction. Ultimately, as all of the lines were taken over by the GWR, the 29 years of service given by the staff in the sorting tender/carriage became part of history and we may never know why such an obscure line was given such a service.

Fig 16 The W411postmark issued on 28 August 1895

Fig 17 The only example of a W411 postmark is on this loose 1887 Jubilee ½d. vermilion

Fig 18 The W412 postmark issued on 27 April 1899 – no examples are known

Fig 19 Frederick A V Campbell, 3rd Earl of Cawdor, who was elected Chairman of the GWR in 1895